

# What Writing Center Conference Summaries Reveal about Writing Center Practices and Principles at Work

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## Abstract

*This article describes an examination of writing center practices and principles through a qualitative study of 1,611 conference summaries prepared during one semester. The ensuing discussion refines understanding the relationship between tutoring sessions and the reporting mechanisms they serve. The summaries reveal that almost half of the students were unable to articulate what type of writing assistance they were seeking. The study considers the importance of educating faculty about the purpose and function of writing centers and provokes questions about the alignment of writing center practices with goals, purposes, and principles.*

The following study resulted from considerations about the relationship between what students expect when they come to a writing center for assistance and what they “get” when they arrive. The study was framed by practices at the University of Toledo’s Writing Center and was formulated by principles and procedures of tutoring at this institution.

The University of Toledo Writing Center website (2005) purports to offer assistance to writers “to generate ideas, organize notes and thoughts, and receive feedback on drafts or completed papers” (Welcome, ¶ 1). Its stated purpose is to “is to provide writers with transferable skills” which transcend a specific assignment and thus are intended to be of long term assistance in “future assignments.” For these reasons, writing center tutors “do not proofread or evaluate papers” but instead “work collaboratively with writers, reading student texts and offering questions and suggestions to help guide revision and proofreading” (Welcome, ¶ 1-3). The philosophical foundations of these stated goals are consonant with principles about student empowerment from contemporary writing theory and comparable to the functions and operations of writing centers throughout the country.

However, theoretical goals are not always as well understood by student users as by the administrators who craft them, nor are the goals always

satisfied in actual practice. Additionally, established practices of providing service may be sustained as routines even if they do not serve useful purposes.

## **Background**

Conference summaries, reports prepared by tutors at the conclusion of writing conferences, were well established practices prior to this study. At the completion of a writing conference session, tutors completed a checklist form to identify the kinds of assistance a student requested and then summarized what actually occurred in the tutoring session. These documents were used to provide records (numbers of students served, kinds of writing projects, length of session, focus of work, etc.) which had been used for accountability and budget allocation purposes. However, because summaries consumed significant resources of time and space (e.g., tutor preparation of each summary, director review, clerical copying and distribution to faculty, and storage of records in office cabinets and archival boxes), their value as accountability measures was questioned. Nonetheless, these conference summaries appeared to be able to offer useful information for exploring the tutoring process.

Furthermore, the work of a writing center is seldom fully appreciated, often misunderstood, or sometimes dismissed as limited in scope or function, population served and outcomes achieved. As Richard Leahy (1990) recognized, "faculty and students have differing notions about what a writing center is" (p. 43). The minimal response from faculty to a brief Writing Center survey sent directly to them suggests the lack of widespread faculty investment in Writing Center operations.

Only 13 faculty responded to the survey distributed in Fall 2004. (Though response nearly doubled in Spring 2005—27 respondents—those remarks are not discussed here because the conference summaries examined were only from Fall 2004; the Spring 2005 responses were nonetheless consistent with the results of the Fall 2004 comments.) Of 13 faculty who responded to the Fall 2004 survey, nine reported their students had used the writing center that term, two stated their students had not used the center, and two did not know. Seven of the nine faculty whose students reportedly visited the writing center stated they had suggested generally to the class to do so, six had recommended the writing center, and two required their students to make an appointment. Eight respondents stated they typically read conference summaries to learn more about the kinds of assistance their students requested or received, two said they discussed the conference summaries with their students, and one reportedly filed it. Seven reported that they noticed some improvement in their student writing, four reported a change in the student's attitude, two remarked about changes in a student's participation, and two reported no evident or apparent change—though one of these respondents did not know whether his or her students had visited the writing center. One commented, "They [students] go in scared. You have made the process very friendly and safe. They come out appreciative. Your help has also saved me a lot of work" (Nelson-Burns).

Despite the Writing Center's faithful reporting of conferences, the minimal information obtained from faculty about the impact of writing center services on student writing led to other means of obtaining information about the

tutoring sessions. Yet, examining tutoring sessions directly is problematic, due in large part to the intrusive nature of such an investigation, which in itself could skew or manipulate the interaction between tutor and student. For these several reasons, an examination of conference summaries was initiated to learn what would be revealed by reading the documents holistically. Initial interests were to determine what insights would emerge about how tutors interacted and the direction of tutoring sessions and about whether these reports served purposes productive enough to warrant maintaining the practice. Sections of the conference summary relevant to this study appear in Table 1.

Table 1

*Writing Center Conference Summary*

Did the writer bring an assignment prompt?		Yes		No	
Writer requested assistance with:		Tutor's Report of the Writing Conference:			
1. CONTENT					
• Understanding the writing assignment					
• Reading text					
• Formulating a thesis					
• Explaining and developing ideas					
2. ORGANIZATION/FORMAT					
• Organizing information in a logical pattern					
• Connecting ideas cohesively					
• Presenting information in expected format genre					
• Understanding academic conventions of writing					
3. STYLE					
• Adopting tone appropriate for situation					
• Selecting words precise for context					
• Constructing varied sentences					
• Engaging rhetorical devices/strategies effectively					
4. LANGUAGE/EXPRESSION					
• Eliminating fragments, run-on sentences					
• Using punctuation correctly					
• Spelling common words correctly					
• Using appropriate grammar and/or syntax					
• Adopting protocols of English-language writers					
5. RESEARCH Protocols/CITATION					
6. OTHER					

Method

Conference summaries prepared during fall semester 2004 were collected and examined. These summaries constituted the entire record produced during that term. Each summary contained an initial identification of anticipated or requested help that the student wanted as well as a summary statement of what the tutor and student worked on during a 25 or 50 minute session. Although the categories in which help was requested were standardized, tutors’ summary comments were not so clearly uniform. Thus, categories of help provided were established from emerging patterns which became evident through multiple readings.

Tutors’ summarized recounting of students’ requests ranged from broad to narrow. Some examples included a range from: “student wanted to know how to write a literature review” to “student needed help using online research database.” Some requests were general: “Needed help deciding on a research topic”, while others were quite specific: “Had trouble with usage of ‘their’ and ‘there.’”

Results

In all, 1,611 conference summaries were examined. A compilation of students’ requests for assistance is presented Tables 2 and 3 and discussed below.

Table 2

Comparison of Students-Identified Purpose for Writing Center Visit

Student identified specific area for assistance during visit	Student did not identify specific area
890 requests for specific help (55%)	721 visits (45%)

In over half the visits, the student asked for assistance in one of the five identified areas: content, organization, style, language/expression, or research and citation protocols. However, in nearly half of the tutoring sessions, the student came to the Writing Center without stating any specific area in which assistance was being sought. The three areas in which assistance was most frequently requested are identified in Table 3.

Table 3

Student-Identified Areas of Requested Assistance

Type of Assistance Requested	Percentage of assistance requested
Content	29%
Language/expression	27%
Organization	23%

Although nearly one third of the students (27%) asked for assistance with language matters, report summaries indicate that students were not concerned solely with grammar. In fact, there were more requests for help in the area of content. And, as one tutor pointed out, for a lot of undergraduates, “grammar” represents everything they *don’t* know. So, if

asked, "What can I help you with today?" students may say, "grammar" when they mean anything from research protocols to style. This explanation may also apply to and account for why faculty, particularly those outside English/writing-related fields, likewise identified "grammar" as an area in which they expected writing center tutors to assist their students' improvement, as discussed below.

In fact, students requested assistance most frequently (29% of the requests) for matters that could be categorized as "content." The second highest area of assistance (27%) requested related to language/expression. Organization/format matters were a close third (with 23%). Many students came to the writing center because they wanted help understanding or dealing with their instructors' directions. This pattern was surprising because this specific request was not anticipated; it was the kind of question one would expect to be directed, instead, to a course instructor. That students asked for this type of help indicates the need to question how writing center staff might pragmatically assist faculty in assignment design, and how tutors can be trained to adequately address the needs of students unable or unwilling to obtain clarification from their instructors.

The category "Style" related to issues which were not grammatical in nature, but with eloquent expression of ideas, so "style" was used to refer to sentence-level issues. (For example, a comment like, "Helped student revise some awkward sentences," would fit under this category.) "Organization/format" referred to paragraph-level issues, though this sometimes included clear verbal expression. While both "style" and "organization/format" refer to clarity in general, "style" refers to the clarity of individual sentences, while "organization/format" refers to the clarity of the work as a whole because organization/format problems necessitate rearranging ideas, while stylistic issues require rearranging or changing individual words.

## **Discussion**

Students sought help in matters related to content more so than in any other area. This is a positive indication that writers are indeed attending to global issues of their texts as a fundamental focus of writing. Ironically, students' requests for help are not necessarily what faculty themselves identify as areas in which their students needed help. Faculty responding to the request for feedback identified seven areas in which their students needed specific help from writing center tutors, ranked from most frequently identified to least frequently: review of a draft, assistance with editing and revision, recommendations for organization and development, helping to develop a response, grammar, citations, and research. The contrast in expectations hints at different emphases among faculty and students as to what features of a writing product most need subsequent work and attention in order to become an improved piece of writing. It may also suggest that faculty themselves are not well versed in what work writing tutors actually do when working with students, or that not all faculty are themselves certain what specific areas of assistance are needed to most improve a student's paper.

That 45% of the writing tutoring sessions took place without the student having identified an area or aspect of writing in which he or she needed or wanted assistance indicates these writers were uncertain of what they

hoped to achieve from a writing center appointment. A number of students had stated verbally that they came to the Writing Center because their instructors required that they do so, as confirmed in faculty feedback. Requiring writing center tutorial assistance has elicited different responses from student writers; some welcome the supportive assistance while others resist tutors' guidance and resent their instructors' insistence that they make an appointment at the center. Mandating tutoring, in turn, raises questions about the effectiveness of a service to which students are assigned, as well as about instructors' perception of the tutor's role in relation to the work of the classroom teacher.

Another explanation for the large number of students who did not report a reason for seeking help or an area in which help was requested is that these students did not know how their writing might be improved. Such passivity underscores the absence of what Elbow (1981) argues writing programs and platforms must help writers achieve: "power [that] comes from the words somehow fitting the *writer* [*sic*] (not necessarily the reader)...power [that] comes from the words somehow fitting *what they are about* [*sic*]" (p. 280). Writers who have a clear idea of the kind of assistance sought before beginning a writing tutoring session are more likely to find a tutoring session positive and productive. Empowerment comes, as Cooper and Odell (1999) state, when students are guided to view their writing critically: "If students are to learn how to respond helpfully to a written text, especially if they are to help assess a text's strengths and weaknesses, we'll have to spend class time teaching them how to do this" (p. xi).

The difference between what faculty expected their students to achieve and what students identified suggests that writing centers need to continue efforts to educate faculty about Writing Center purposes and the values that are brought to a writing tutoring session. More effective methods of communicating Writing Center goals and purposes need to be explored in order to establish more successful working relationships with these important campus partners in order to uphold the Writing Center's published belief that "writing is a recursive activity involving several steps that include generating ideas, organizing thoughts, developing a first draft, rewriting, and editing" (*Mission*, ¶ 2).

Based on the study's results indicating so many students came to the Writing Center without a clear and evident purpose for their visit, the sign-in procedures were changed. That is, prior to this study, when students arrived for an appointment, they "signed in" by providing demographic and course-specific details—year in college, major, course for which they sought tutoring, etc. As a result of this study, students were also asked to review the areas identified on the tutor's summary form and check areas in which they wanted assistance prior to the session's start. The purpose of this very simple change in procedures was to promote at least brief reflection on their writing and to consider areas in which a tutor might provide assistance. The intent was to provide a means of developing and promoting the empowerment of which Elbow speaks.

### *Implications*

This study prompted a re-examination of the Writing Center's mission statement, professed purposes, and reporting practices. Because budget

allocation is driven by productivity and utilization reports, reporting Writing Center use has been measured by numeric calculations (e.g., numbers of students), and its support is linked to its relationship with faculty. However, since the Writing Center's primary purpose is to serve the writers themselves, practices which strengthen that essential relationship need to be augmented. In order to realize the values expressed in the University's Writing Center website, policies and practices must work together to empower the writer, without sacrificing the Writing Center's important relationship to the faculty whose support must be enlisted. Specifically, in order to provide the long-term assistance ascribed to, means must be crafted to support the Writing Center's assertion that it "provid[es] the opportunity for writers to maintain ownership of their own papers" and assist them to "learn to use the vocabulary, organization and format specific to the academic discipline in which they are writing" (*Mission*, ¶ 3). Then, the Writing Center's philosophies of a "non-directive tutorial style" (*Mission*, ¶ 4) by which tutors "serve as an audience instead of as editors or proofreaders" can be more widely recognized, expected, and respected (*Mission*, ¶ 5).

Additionally, preparing conference summaries for faculty must be reconsidered. This practice implies that it is the faculty member who has the sole right to learn about tutoring sessions, and thus is presumably the one who benefits from learning about it. If the practice of preparing conference summaries is sustained, it should include sharing the summaries first and foremost with the writer. To do otherwise bypasses the primary recipient of Writing Center services and denies the writer the written record of interaction which might serve to prompt reflection, increase the effectiveness of writing conferences, and promote empowerment. In these ways, the Writing Center will increase its responsiveness to the needs of student writers and affirm its role as a critical player in promoting sustainable skills.

The evident need to aid students to effect ownership of their writing and thus relinquish the instructor's authority over their texts can only be addressed by designing practices which promote this. Guiding students to become reflective through the language of self-evaluation engages them in assuming responsibility for their writing products, thus changing the dynamic of a student's approach to writing center assistance and increasing a tutor's effectiveness. Re-enforcing students' awareness of and responsibility for the linguistic choices they make—that is, their own strength and weakness—will assist the writer, the tutor, and the instructor to each work in concert more effectively. In the process, students will be less likely to see the writing center as a fix-it shop and more likely to see it as a workshop—a place to discuss ways to manipulate language and focus on features of writing specific to the writer's intended purpose.

### *Further Research*

The data collection purposes and method presented in this study may serve as a prelude to examinations of procedures and practices in other campus-based student support services. Such an investigation generates new considerations for how to evaluate writing centers' effectiveness in serving students' needs. This kind of study may be of help to both writing center personnel (administrators and tutors) as well as to composition instructors as they jointly work to support student learning.

To date, the effectiveness of tutoring services has typically been measured by correlating student project or even course grades with the provision of tutoring assistance. This correlation assumes a quantitative and short-term gain is not only identifiable, but is the expected, preferred result. Such an approach disregards and even contradicts the basic principles of learning theory that are the foundation to developing strong writing skills. Thus, other ways of assessing the value of writing center assistance must be developed which are consistent with and support sound principles of writer empowerment.

The qualitative approach employed in this study might be replicated in other centers which keep similar records. The concept of reviewing documents of this nature may also prompt writing center directors to consider models that will more effectively review their practices, modify policies or procedures for greater effectiveness, and address the need for collaborative support of student learning that partners writing centers and classroom instructors in more open dialogue.

In fact, if conference summaries are used only for the minimally productive purposes now in place, they should be abandoned altogether to conserve tutors' time for interaction with student writers and to preserve the anonymity of a session which is not now being reviewed for substantive ends.

## **Conclusion**

Finally, the present practices of measuring outcomes and reporting writing center usage must be reconsidered and brought in line with the values each learning center espouses in its mission statements, goals, and affirmed values. During her long tenure as advocate of Writing Center pedagogy and presence, the late Muriel Harris (2001) described the fundamental purposes and practices of writing center tutor-student interactive engagement with the writer's text:

Students also come in [to the Writing Center] because of cases of writing apprehension or lack of confidence about their writing skills. The tutor's job is to work with the whole person—her abilities, concerns, and writing history, as well as her paper—to establish a comfortable interaction within which the student and tutor can work productively together. The all-important collaborative relationship a tutor aims to create permits students to learn more effectively, to take a more active role in the conversation, and to ask the kinds of questions they hesitate to ask teachers for fear of appearing inept or just plain stupid. (¶ 2)

To achieve this goal, writing center administrators must better understand what the student writer actually brings to the writing center conference and how records of the interaction should be used.

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